

VZCZCXR07250  
PP RUEHCI  
DE RUEHK #6392 2961220  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 231220Z OCT 06  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2294  
INFO RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1335  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9421  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7622  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8771  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1546  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 006392

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/23/2016  
TAGS: PREL PGOV BG  
SUBJECT: ELECTION REFORM DIALOGUE LIMPS FORWARD

Classified By: Geeta Pasi, Deputy Chief of Mission; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (U) BNP General Secretary Mannan Bhuyian and Awami League (AL) General Secretary Abdul Jalil held their sixth formal dialogue meeting October 23 to discuss AL demands for electoral reforms in advance of the January 2007 elections. The meeting lasted a brief 20 minutes and there were no formal statements by either side afterwards. This was the first meeting after the return of Prime Minister Zia and AL leader Sheik Hasina to Bangladesh following separate visits to Saudi Arabia.

¶2. (SBU) After the meeting, both parties caucused throughout the day to discuss strategies and next steps. Public speculation ran the gamut from a last minute deal to a complete breakdown of the talks. At 1600 local, Bhuyian said publicly that talks had not broken down and left open the possibility of further meetings.

¶3. (SBU) AL opposition to the likely appointment of former Chief Justice KM Hasan as the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government remains the central issue of the reform dialogue, closely followed by AL demands for removal of Chief Election Commissioner Aziz. Hasan is first in line under the constitution for appointment as Chief Advisor; however, the AL argues he is not politically neutral and is therefore disqualified from the position. The constitution provides several alternatives, but the two parties disagree over the interpretation of the relevant provisions.

¶4. (C) Hasan has done little to prepare for his impending responsibilities and is soliciting the views of key diplomats and others on whether he should exercise his right to decline the appointment. The Australian and Canadian High Commissioners told Ambassador they met separately with Hasan at his invitation, reviewed the challenges facing him and advised him to do what he thought best for his country. They described Hasan as ill prepared, isolated and not confident, adding that he told them he was having difficulty recruiting people to serve as advisors to the Caretaker Government. He also said he wanted to know the U.S. views.

¶5. (C) Ambassador met with Hasan at his request on October 22. He said he would "seriously consider" declining the appointment if the "constitutional" question regarding the choice of an alternative could be resolved. Without that, he feared declining to serve could create an even larger crisis. Ambassador stressed the importance we place on a peaceful, free and fair election in which all parties participate. She noted that Hasan's appointment had become personal for Sheik Hasina and that she was unlikely to yield on this issue.

¶6. (C) Comment: Ambassador found Hasan more confident and

less uncertain than diplomatic colleagues reported. He reported that he is successfully recruiting people to serve as advisors. He seemed genuinely concerned about the impact of his decision. His comments underscore the complexity of the caretaker government issue. Were Hasan to step down, it is not clear -- or agreed by the two parties -- who would succeed him. End comment.

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